

Spraying of marsh reeds alarms neighbors

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Mary Mohr looks forward to September, when the heat lets up, the crowds thin out and cool ocean breezes prevail. It's a time when her three children play more outside their Second Avenue home.

This year, though, Mohr is planning to keep them inside with the windows shut. Her concern is a nearby Army Corps of Engineers' project in which herbicides are being used to kill an invasive marsh reed called phragmites.

The Army Corps sprayed about 50 acres last year at Cape May Point State Park and at the Nature Conservancy's Cape May Migratory Bird Refuge. This year, beginning Tuesday morning and continuing until Sept. 30, the plan is to hit another 45 acres with the glyphosate-based herbicide Glypro.

Mohr has no problem with the goal of killing phragmites, an Asian species choking out native marsh plants, but she does not want her family - including blond-haired children Michael, 11, Hannah, 8, and Haley, 2 - to get exposed.

"They're always playing outside. My kids either ride their bikes or walk to school. But now, like last year and probably many more years to come, we have to worry about thousands of gallons of Glypro being sprayed practically in our back yards," Mohr said.

The Second Avenue resident and her husband, Mike, feel so strongly about the issue they wrote a letter in opposition and got about 30 nearby residents to sign it. The letter questions whether the chemicals being used pose risks to people, especially children, and argues that in other areas they have brought no "permanent success" in killing phragmites.

"They have such extensive root systems that it doesn't work," Mohr said.

The Army Corps dealt with similar issues last year when the spraying began and insists it is perfectly safe.

"We're using an EPA-approved herbicide, Glypro, which is similar to Rodeo and is approved by the EPA for aquatic and near aquatic environments," said Merv Brokke, a spokesman for the Army Corps.

In spite of such assurances, Mohr still has reservations. She notes how many times the government insisted a product was safe and suddenly had to take it off the market.

There was strong opposition to herbicide spraying last year, but it was somewhat quelled when weather conditions eliminated the aerial applications. The Army Corps decided to spray the herbicide only from the ground and will do the same this year. Mohr is pleased about this since it reduces the risk of the chemicals drifting to residential areas. Municipal officials have pushed for safety precautions, spraying notifications and public meetings on the project.

"There have been a lot of concessions on the part of the Army Corps. For one, they aren't doing the aerial spraying, which is a huge win for the people of the area," said West Cape May Mayor Pam Kaithern.

West Cape May is pushing for further changes, and Kaithern announced a public meeting is set for 7 p.m. Sept. 28 at West Cape May Borough Hall. Representatives of the Army Corps will be at the meeting.

"They will have information for the public and allow time for questions and answers," Kaithern said.

Brokke, however, said the meeting is mostly about the water-control aspects of the project that includes restoring marshland and rebuilding beaches between Cape May and Cape May Point. Kaithern acknowledges the borough has not received all the changes it has requested. She doesn't see much hope of stopping the spraying since the herbicide has government approval for this use.

"Unless that is changed, they're clear to use it," Kaithern said.

Mohr is worried because chemicals in a similar herbicide, the weed killer Roundup, have been linked to cancer and could affect kidneys and reproductive systems. Mohr said glyphosates have also been linked to attention deficit disorder in the children of some farmers who use it. She notes many people in the area still get their water from private wells.

"I am disgusted that our children are put at risk," Mohr wrote in the letter.

Brokke defended the use of the herbicide. He said some new information has come out recently about Roundup, but he said Glypro is not Roundup. He noted the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection is a partner in the project.

Mohr worries the spraying could go on for many years, as it has in other phragmites-infested marshes.

"My main concern is it doesn't happen year after year. That's what I'm really worried about, the constant exposure every year. It's just scary," Mohr said.

Brokke said the spraying here will only be for five years, and this is already the second year. The project calls for 50 years of beach replenishment but only five years of spraying phragmites, selectively planting beneficial marsh plants and making adjustments to water-control structures in the marsh.

Mohr would like to know how many gallons of herbicides that will entail. There is no answer since it depends on how effective the Glypro is in killing the phragmites.

The spraying began Tuesday and this led to closures of the trails at Cape May Point State Park. Park Naturalist Matt Pelligrine said the park is also doing some spraying of the pesticide Rodeo at the same time to control other invasive species. While the Army Corps is battling phragmites, the park has been waging war against some vines and bushes including porcelain berry, Japanese honeysuckle and clematis.

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